

*** NETANSWERS INTERNET EXTRA ***

*** Number 65: There is no escaping your past on the Internet ***

Today: a cautionary tale about using the Internet.

I was testing out Fast Search, a new Web search engine at alltheweb.com. It's a fantastic search tool: true to its name, it is lightning fast. In addition, it indexes more of the Web than any other search engine, weighing in with 25% of all Web pages.

So, I decided to do a little "ego-surfing" -- that is, searching for my own name just to see where I'm mentioned on the Web. I wasn't really surprised when it found 1,678 occurrences of my name: after a decade on the Internet, writing countless articles, and maintaining FAQ documents, my name has spread far and wide.

However, I was surprised to find information that I had put on the Internet long ago, and had since forgotten about, was still out there. Newsgroup posts that I had written years ago, a petition that I had signed, even Web pages that I had created and since removed, are still out there in cyberspace -- for anyone to see and completely outside of my control.

Here's the moral of the story: the Internet doesn't forget. Before you post anything in a public Internet forum -- your resume on a jobs wanted site, a message on Usenet, or a Web page -- think about whether you'll want that information floating around the 'net next year, even ten years from now. Because there is the possibility that your contribution will still be out there, somewhere, a decade from now. If I were a little paranoid, I might even think that one might be able to use the Internet to gather quite a few bits of information about another Internet user.

Once you put information on the Internet, it is truly out of your hands. It could be, and probably will be, archived by any number of "spiders," programs designed to fetch and store information from the Net.

Deja (www.deja.com) for instance, keeps a complete archive of Usenet posts through 1995. If you've posted your resume to a jobs newsgroup, a personals ad to a sex newsgroup, or asked questions about health problems, those messages are still holed away for your employer, your spouse, or your insurance company to find.

Web pages, too, can be archived and made available after their original sites have been taken down. The Internet Archive is a great example -- this project is an effort to archive material from the Web before it is lost to the ages. For example, many sites related to the 1996 U.S. Presidential election have been stored for posterity. It is a laudable goal, and the project has saved more than 500,000 Web sites from extinction. But the offshoot is this: even though you've erased your "I love the Macarena" site because your musical tastes have changed, your children may still be able to find it and giggle at you years from now.

Countless Web sites encourage Internet users to make free home pages, take part in discussions, or be a part of an online community. There is nothing wrong with any of these things. Before you post that message or upload that Web page, remember that anyone might see what you have to say, and that it's not so simple to "undo"

something you've shared on the Internet. So check your spelling and think twice before posting private information.

If you crave a little more privacy, get an anonymous e-mail address from the countless sites that provide them, such as Yahoo and iName. You can use it to disassociate messages on newsgroups and mailing lists from your real identity. No one will ever have to know that you're a member of the South Park discussion list, today or tomorrow.

=*=*= RELEVANT WEB SITES =*=*=

Fast Search: <http://alltheweb.com>
Deja: <http://www.deja.com>
The Internet Archive: <http://www.archive.org>
Yahoo Mail: <http://mail.yahoo.com>
iName: <http://www.iname.com>

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The NetAnswers Internet Extra is free to all CompuServe members. It's available in the Internet New Users Forum (GO INETNEW) in file library 11, "NetAnswers".

Got comments or ideas for future issues? We want to hear 'em. Just send a message to savetz@compuserve.com (74774,2725).

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